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# Twenty-first-Century effective principles for successful urban Christian missions in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

The twenty-first Century Church faces many challenges in doing urban Christian missions, such as a need for a strategic plan to carry out effective Christian missions in Nigerian cities. Over the years, Christian missions emphasised village missions and underdeveloped places. However, recently there has been a clarion call to shift attention to urban missions. Massive Christian mission opportunities are more evident in the cities than rural areas because the cities attract more people than rural communities. People from different religious backgrounds are all present in the cities, the rich and the poor, the givers and the beggars, sane and insane, the hurts and the unhurt people, hard-working and lazy people, busy people and the less busy, diplomats and businessmen and women, travellers and passers-by and host of others. This article researches the concepts of urban missions, discusses the significance of urban missions and challenges of urban missions and draws out practical principles of doing urban missions in the twenty-first Century.

**Keywords:** Urban Christian Missions, Effective Principles, Rural Missions, Urban Mission, Culture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, countless emphasis has been on reaching out to people in rural areas. However, since Christ died for all, the gospel is needed to be heard by the whole world. The twenty-first Century has birthed significant challenges to urban missions, such as planning to do Christian missions in cities strategically to achieve God's purpose of redemption in urban areas. Therefore, this article aims to draw out practical principles for doing urban Christian missions in the twenty-first Century because, without these practical principles, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to carry out Christian missions in urban areas correctly. The research viewed the urban Christian missions throughout this work as all mission work done by a Christian missionary. Also, the researcher used urban and cities interchangeably.

### Concept of Urban Mission

Over time, the emphasis has often been on village missions and other underdeveloped places, but attention has recently shifted to urban Christian

missions. Christian missions in the urban setting are different from country-side ones. Fuller, (2013) opines, "City people see churches daily. Most cities have regular evangelistic movements and people often think they do not need missionaries". Reflection on this submission reveals that there are chances that most people living in the cities look at the Church only from a distance and not necessarily be part of it.

Consequently, there is a need to take the gospel message to them. Fuller, (2013) noted the category of people likely to dwell in the city. These could be people from other religions, beggars, mad people, poor and rich, busy people who are conscious of their careers, wealthy, diplomats and businessmen and women, travellers and passers-by and others (Ibid). The missionary should reach all these people for Christ.

Anna Ruddick opines that "usually mission is what Christians do among people before they become Christians". This definition suggests that Christian missions are activities aimed at bringing souls into the kingdom of God because, as Christian witnesses, there is a need to depopulate the devil's kingdom and populate God's kingdom. Moreover, since the Great Commission comprises global urban areas, planning to reach them for Christ is necessary.

Given the above, the question calling for one's attention is, 'What is the urban Christian mission?' Zhu, (1999) posits that there is "no consensus on the actual definition of urban and urbanisation in literature", but there is an understanding of urban at its most basics and concerning the city (Donohue, 2010; Mukhtar & Raphael, 2022; Huma & Hyder, 2022). The city has a concentration of human beings compared to the rural environments and brings people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, works and languages together.

### **Urban Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Nigeria**

Nigeria has witnessed the relocation of people from rural areas to urban centres in the last centuries. People migrate into urban centres at an alarming rate to look for greener pastures; some people come to the urban area seeking white-collar jobs, some are looking for admissions into higher institutions of learning and some receive better medical attention, which they cannot get in the rural area. Fortunately, this is peculiar to the whole world. Moreover, Friedmann states "that by 2025 a stunning 60% of humanity will be living in cities, compared with 40% in 2000 (Sandercock and Samara, 2009)". The pursuit of greener pastures has made many abandon the rural setting. Simona Varella documents that:

Nigeria has the highest population in Africa. In 2019, its estimated population amounted to over 200 million people and was estimated to constantly increase in the following decades. This figure could double and reach four hundred million people by 2050. In the last 50 years, Nigeria's populace has increased at a very high rate. Lagos has the highest population in Nigeria, the largest city in Sub-Saharan Africa (Varella, 2020).

Also, the World Bank, (2020) population estimated that:

Nigeria's urban population for 2019 was 102,806,948, a 4.25% increase from 2018. For 2018 were 98,611,179, a 4.33% increase from 2017. For 2017 were 94,518,555, a 4.4% increase from 2016. Moreover, for 2016 was 90,531,047, 4.48% from 2015.

From the above statistics, the writer deduced that Nigeria is an extensive and densely populated country. Furthermore, in the breakdown of statistics as of 2019, Lagos state had 9,000,000, Kano 3,626,068, Ibadan 3,565,108, Kaduna 1,582,102, Port Harcourt 1,148,665, Benin City 1,125,058 and Maiduguri 1,112,449. These cities ranked highest in the urban centres of Nigeria (Worldometer, 2020). Reflection on this reveals a need for Christian missions' activities in these cities because if a state in Nigeria has a population of about 9,000,000 out of the country's total population, then the Church needs to double its efforts to reach the entire population for Christ.

However, as it is, the prediction of 400 million by 2050 is possible, according to the World Bank, (2020) estimation. The ready question that comes to the mind is, 'Is there a need for mission work in the city since mega-churches and Christian religious activities are going on frequently? Truly, missionary activities in an urban setting are peculiar because of the challenges faced by the missionaries.

No wonder the Anglican Urban Network, (2008) asserts that "growing cities hold many challenges for global institutions, governments and even the church". These challenges result from the rapid civilisation of the cities compared with the rural setting. These challenges are from various readings and interactions with scholars – secularisation, postmodernism and pluralism, multi-ethnic, "population explosion, socioeconomic gap and the public arena (Conn and Ortiz, 2001)". Some of these are discussed briefly in subsequent paragraphs.

***Secularisation***

The proclamation of the gospel of Christ for ages has continued in the world and the message remains that Jesus is the Saviour sent by God to deliver the world from eternal condemnation. Pratt et al., (2014) notes that "the gospel never changes. However, global conditions change constantly...one such changing condition is the growing secularisation". Secularisation has eaten deep into most urban centres such that they think of God or religious matters as an afterthought. Most individuals in urban centres feel they have tried out Christianity, which did not work for them. Hence, many have become "de-Christianized" (Ibid: 254).

***Postmodernism***

Escobar, (2003) opines that "the renewed interest in all kinds of religions, including those that existed before Christian missionaries appeared, can better be described as a sign of postmodernity". Urban centres today are at the forefront of typical postmodern societies where the thought of God is secondary and self-glorification is primary. Escobar, (2003) further notes that "an important aspect of postmodernity is glorifying the body. It offers thousands of beauty products to modify improve and make perfect. Even to the point of promising ways to overcome the inroads of ageing (Ibid: 75)". This notion is evident in many cities in Nigeria and globally. The quest for material things is significantly on the increase.

***Pluralism***

In 21st-century urban centres, religious pluralism has dominated the teachings and permeated the people's hearts. Dickson, (2013) noted two kinds of pluralism – Popular and Sophisticated. Pluralism, basically, was according to Dickson, (2013) states that "all religions teach essentially the same thing. They only differ on what name to give God (Yahweh, Allah) or how to approach him in prayer. However, they agree on the big issues – God's existence, the afterlife and the need for human kindness". Reflection on this submission reveals that pluralism on the surface appears correct. However, on second thought, through effective teaching and understanding, it is a great challenge to the Christian faith because there are no similar gods to Yahweh; the God of Yahweh remains the only living and true God in the entire universe. He is the creator of heaven and the earth and everything in it.

On the other hand, the sophisticated pluralist attempts to tap into a more profound spiritual reality. Religion does not describe this reality; they merely express a longing to experience it. This view indicates that sophisticated pluralism is a step ahead of popular pluralism because it practically debunks the existence of the need to trust or believe in God. People in urban centres often, in a bid to tolerate other religions tend to fall into the error of both popular and sophisticated pluralism and the missionary has this to deal with in cities, which has since been a challenge in urban Christian missions.

***Multi-Ethnic***

Another major challenge of the urban Christian missions is the multi-ethnic and the presence of diverse cultural groups. People in a typical urban setting usually have different characteristics traceable to their culture and ethnic group. Ringer and Elinor, (2001) define an ethnic group as "a group that consists of those who conceive of themselves as being alike by their ancestry, real or fictitious and who are so regarded by others". This definition suggests that ethnic groups have things in common such as being related by blood or life activities like jobs and location. Bolaffi et al., (2003) assert that "ethnic groups have their respective identities by making identical claims about who they are".

In the presence of ethnic groups, there are great chances of being ethnocentric. According to Hsu, (2017), ethnocentrism is "the idea that one's own culture is the centre of everything, thus judging other cultures". That is, believing one's own culture is superior to other people's cultures, which is not the case on several occasions. This definition corroborates the view of Solomon and Theiss, (2013), who say ethnocentrism is "the tendency to see one's own cultural beliefs as more correct, appropriate and morally than other cultures".

According to Jandt, (2007), ethnocentrism "believes in the superiority of one's own culture". Multi-ethnic has posed a significant challenge to mission work in urban centres because a noticeable number of the inhabitants tend to associate with people belonging to their ethnic groups and if the missionary does not belong to them, they tend not to associate with or even allow him or her into their midst.

***Social Stratification***

Jackson, (2010) posits that "all societies are grouped socially and stratified due to individual recognitions and responses, acts of deference and superiority". This view indicates that the class question in society is not debatable because the class issue is evident in every society. However, some terrible attributes in individuals, such as the feeling of superiority and acts of deference, could injure

peaceful co-existence in society either now or later. William Lambov opines that "social stratification is the product of social differentiation and social evaluation".

William Lambov says social stratification does not imply "any specific type of class or caste; rather, it implies the systematic differences between certain institutions or people". This submission further buttresses that in any society, people are not equal because or based on several factors put into consideration such as type or nature of the job, financial status, marital status-which could mean single, married and even if married, how many wives are we talking about? and other modes of groupings. Social stratification is common in all world societies, whether rural or urban.

Bottero, (2005) submits that "everyone lives within pre-existing relations of unequal power, status or economic resources; and these unequal relations surround and constrain one, provide the context of interactions, inevitably affect the choices one makes in life, open some channels of opportunity and closes other". This submission indicates that social stratification concerns inequality in all spheres of society, positively or negatively affecting people.

Resources are not usually evenly distributed in most societies, negatively impacting people. Beeghley, (2015) communicates that "unequal possession of resources affects people's lives' chances; their abilities to share in the existing goods and services. It also affects how they choose to live, as indicated by their consumption habits, use of leisure time, world view and fundamental values". This view indicates that human life can be affected by the class he or she belongs to in society. Therefore, the Christian missions in the urban society have this challenge because the class he or she belongs to will affect the kind or calibre of people he or she could encounter while doing the mission work. Because "social stratification" describes the ordering of social relationships (Crompton, 2008)".

Moreover, suppose a missionary in a typical urban area does not belong to the elites. In that case, the missionary is likely not to readily have access to the rich in that community, thereby making the work of evangelism difficult, if not impossible, because of a lack of financial resources, which will also inform or determine the human and material resources the missionary will be able to access.

### Significance of Urban Mission

Urban mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has tremendous significance for advancing the gospel. Vinson Synan states, "An urban imperative hangs heavily over the church". This submission implies that the Church should communicate the gospel to humanity. Understanding this makes it easy to say that the urban mission is significant for the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. There are several reasons why the urban mission is significant. These reasons promote the gospel, win souls for the kingdom, counter false teachings and doctrines and participate in God's kingdom expansion.

Promoting the gospel of Christ in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century must be treated as urgent. The situation in urban centres of the world calls for the quick and urgent spread of the gospel. Posterski, (1989) communicates that "the strong Christian consensus from the past is crumbling. Before now, there were no arguments about the need to wait for sex until marriage. Although people then experimented with it, there was a notion that it was wrong. However, today the reverse is the case as many openly experiment with it". This view indicates that the rate at which immorality is increasing in urban centres is alarming. This view suggests that the Church lags in this regard.

Also, the definition of marriage before now is a man and a woman, but today, some societies have legalised same-sex marriage and to them, nothing seems to be wrong with it and the number of single parenting has drastically increased (*Ibid*). Therefore, the Church at this time must take up the challenge to promote the gospel in urban centres.

### Principles for Christian Urban Missions in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Mission in the urban setting requires that the Church and missionaries follow lay down rules, principles and strategies to do missions in the urban area, especially in the twenty-first Century. Sanneh, (1993) notes, "There is no doubt that we have entered a new age in the church's life". Hence, there is the need to carefully draw out principles for a compelling mission. The research grouped these principles into six from interactions with various scholars. These are: Studying the environment to know the town's culture, cultivating a relationship, knowing what it means to do mission work in the urban centres, leadership training and development and having the right mindset and education (John et al., 2022). Subsequent paragraphs discussed these principles.

The first principle of compelling urban mission in the twenty-first Century is studying to know the environment. Sands, (2003) defines environment as "the objects or the region surrounding anything. Accordingly, the term encompasses both the features and the products of the natural world and those of human civilisation". This definition projects that environment means everything

surrounding one's physical and spiritual world. Similarly, Sutton, (2007) defines environment as "eternal conditions or surroundings, particularly where people live or work".

The urban mission requires that one is conversant with the environment to do the work of the mission well and adequately. Christ used this principle during His earthly ministry in Luke 10:1 "After this, the Lord selected seventy-two and sent them in two's ahead of him to each town where he was about to go". Christ understood the necessity of knowing the environment before venturing into the mission business. If modern missionaries claim to be followers of Christ, they must cultivate the habit of first surveying the environment, enabling them to prepare adequately for the task.

Also, knowing the culture of the people in urban centres is part of knowing what the environment entails. Droogers, (2005) opines that "missiologists cannot exercise or understand their tasks without paying attention to the culture of the people amongst whom they are working". This opinion indicates that culture is a crucial and essential aspect that missionaries in the urban setting cannot overlook. Several scholars have defined culture from various perspectives.

Moore, (2004) defines culture as "that complex whole which consists of knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom and other skills and habits developed by man as a member of society". This definition indicates that culture is every society's acquired way of life. Also, Williams, (2003) defines culture as "a particular way of life that articulates certain meanings and ideals not only in art and education but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour in the society". In essence, culture, from this definition, is the whole way of life of people in a community, society or group of people. More comprehensively, culture, according to Aryeh, (2016), is: The sum patterns of behaviour acquired from human dealings with their environment and transmitted to later generations through art and symbol, the aim of which is to define a group's identity and aspirations, to serve as the basis of social behaviour and as a factor determining what is to be accepted or rejected in each situation.

These definitions imply that the missionary must be able to understand the people's way of life in the urban centre. From how they dress and talk, their language, their relationships, their thinking or reasoning process, world view, the way they celebrate with one another, their family setting and their jobs, the missionary must learn how they generally live for him or her to know the proper method of gospel propagation to apply among them.

Merry, (2018) says that a city is a place of anonymity and disorder because everybody is on his or her own that is, each person or individual focuses his or her attention on himself or herself most time. Moreover, a city is a settlement where people treat each other with indifference, competition and exploitation. It is a place of strangers, a web of social gossip, social pressure and concern about the opinions of others that cannot hold in check the criminal, the prostitute and the social deviant or prevent the personal breakdown of the increasingly isolated individual.

This description reveals the typical way of life in a city. Hence, the missionary must learn this and relate well for him or her to impact that society. Moreover, learning about the culture enables the missionary to contextualise the gospel's message without losing the gospel message. Driscoll, (2004) posits that even in the face of the negativity of postmodernism, "postmodern culture is something that should not be ignored, opposed or embraced; rather, it simply another culture that one should seek to redeem and transform by the power of the gospel". Hence, the missionary must be able to contextualise the gospel's message carefully.

Luzabetak, (1988) defines contextualisation as "the process by which a local Christian society incorporates the Gospel message (the text) with the real-life context, combining text and circumstance into that single, God-intended reality called Christian life". The urban missionary should understand that the people's way of life in urban centres differs from those of people living in rural areas; hence, whatever will put the people off must be carefully avoided. Because "being urban and living in a predominantly urban world shapes how one thinks, lives and relates with others (Davey, 2010)".

Also, knowing the time is part of studying the environment. The missionary doing urban missions must have a good understanding of the time. People who live in urban centres are often time conscious because many take their careers seriously. Therefore, missionary work in an urban setting requires the missionary to manage people's time appropriately. Many would not attend church activities rather than forgo their businesses and work.

The second principle for doing Christian missions in urban centres is relationship. Barna, (2002) notes that "excessive relational demands have crippled human relationship capabilities. An isolated attitude has become a way of life"; hence, many who were supposed to be affected positively through the cultivated relationship wander away. Furthermore, "many have remained unchurched today because when they look at Christians, they do not like what they see (Ibid: 18)". Noticeable numbers of unchurched people chose to remain unchurched because they lacked trusted relationships.

Barna, (2002) submitted that "the chances of unchurched people going to a worship service independently without force but through continual encouragement from trusted friends are slim (Ibid: 24)". Therefore, inviting a typical urban settler to a church

programme is not the first step, but cultivating the relationship through which the invitation will thrive is essential because this seems to be the first step in the right direction.

The third principle knows what it takes to carry out Christian missions in urban centres. Someone once told a story of a missionary who could not cope in the city because he had lived in a rural area for many years. His wife wanted lands to cultivate and plant her crops, but none existed. She wept and cried all day to return to the village because they did not enjoy city life. They did not know what it takes to live in a city and their way of life, dressing, eating and living was not in tune with the city (Yusuf, 2020). Reaching out to people in the city can be effective when the missionary understands what it means to live in a city.

The fourth principle is that leadership training and development are essential for effective urban missions. Krallmann, (2002) submits that "a shortage of competent leadership can not only be discerned in secular society but has also surfaced in the body of Christ". Reflection on this submission reveals that Christian missions should handle the matter of leadership adequately. Leaders doing urban missions must understand that the city is too big to be covered by just a person.

Bakke, (1997) opines that "urban ministry cannot be done in isolation". Hence, others must be trained. Besides, "developing and empowering others demonstrates obedience and will provide the basis for future growth (Elliston, 1992)". Therefore, leadership selection in doing urban missions should be made carefully. The life and character of whoever will be selected should also be considered. Mc-Kenna, (2015) notes that "in the selection of Christian leadership, questions about a character should be asked" to avoid selecting and training the wrong persons. Many things could cause distractions in urban Christian missions; hence, the leader should exhibit maturity.

The fifth principle is that having the right mindset is another effective principle for urban missions in the twenty-first Century. Missionaries doing urban missions should have the right mindset. Bakke, (1997) assumes that "the major obstacle to overcome is a negative frame of mind about downtown and its future". This assumption substantiates that there are missionaries with the wrong mindset doing missions. Therefore, the heart of those missionaries must be changed if the mission will be effectively carried out in urban centres in the twenty-first Century because the seat of all decisions to be made even while doing missions is the heart.

Martin, (2009) opines, "The heart is the seat of our soul, emotions and passions. It is the essence of our being that drives our thoughts and our motives". However, missionaries must understand that whatever becomes of them while on the mission field often results from their mindset towards the field. Bakke, (1997) bolsters this by saying, "Urban pastors need to know that the major barriers to effective urban ministry are seldom in the cities; they are in our churches, mission agencies and international policies (1bid)".

A noticeable number of missionaries go to mission fields with the wrong mindsets. It takes patience to win souls to Christ. Villafane, (1995) notes that "burning patience is that quality of faith that in any city...not notwithstanding its complexity and confusion, its chaos and crime, its heart cries and challenges, can and must believe that the gospel of the Lord and Saviour makes a difference". Though it takes time, the gospel of Christ will find its place in the heart of the hearers. Hence, patience is a needed virtue for any missionary doing urban missions.

Finally, education is another principle to be used in urban ministry. Education, according to Rather, (2004), "equips the individual with social, moral, cultural and spiritual aspects and thus makes life progressive, cultured and civilised". Furthermore, Rather, (2004) says education is "the development of the power of adaptation to an ever-changing social environment (Ibid)", further indicating that education is necessary for societal changes. If a missionary succeeds in doing urban missions, education is necessary. Also, the use of technology for ministry in urban missions in the twenty-first Century is essential and it may not be possible to cope without foundational education. Also, etymologically, education is from the Latin word *educatum*, which means 'to bring up or 'to nourish (Ibid).

Reflection on this meaning by this writer reveals that for effective nourishing of souls in urban centres, the missionary should have education on the needful requirements of those living in an urban setting or location. Also, the relationship with the city's elites requires that those doing urban missions in the twenty-first Century understand the cities better. The rate at which society is rapidly changing requires that the urban missionaries are personnel who adapt to the situation, which can be done effectively through education.

## 2. CONCLUSION

The significant change the world is witnessing requires practical principles to ensure that mission work is done effectively, even in urban centres, in the face of significant change in the twenty-first Century. This article has explained the concepts of urban missions, discussed the significance of urban missions and challenges and drawn-out practical principles of doing urban missions in the twenty-first Century. It has discussed studying to know the environment and the culture of the town, cultivating a relationship,

knowing what it means to do missions in the urban centres, leadership training and development, having the right mindset and education as six practical principles of doing urban mission in the twenty-first Century.

#### Informed consent

Not applicable.

#### Ethical approval

Not applicable.

#### Conflicts of interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interests.

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All data associated with this study are present in the paper.

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